



POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: SYMPATHETIC MAGIC

Marino Pérez-Álvarez
University of Oviedo

Positive psychology (PPs) is probably the strongest movement in psychology thus far in the 21st century. However, in spite of its enormous success and the doubtless attraction of its high-profile subjects (happiness, well-being, optimism), it lacks a robust scientific and philosophical basis on which to build. Beginning by showing that the origin of PPs is more like a religious movement than development of a science, it goes on to the more important argument that PPs has certain underlying fallacies, such as a supposed equation of happiness and the inherently positive nature of certain psychological characteristics. It is also argued that the efficacy attributed to PPs is not borne out by the available evidence, in particular, with regard to cancer. Positive psychotherapy to increase happiness and reduce depression seems to be no more than a placebo. No matter how much PPs flaunts a positive side, it still has negative aspects, like its division of psychology, the tyranny of the positive attitude and unscrupulous optimism. In view of all of the above, the real question is, according to the final philosophical argument, that happiness is not a principle of life on which a science can be established.

Key words: Positive psychology, Happiness, Optimism, Tyranny of the positive attitude, Myth of happiness.

La Psicología Positiva (PsP) es probablemente el mayor movimiento dentro de la psicología en lo que va del siglo XXI. Sin embargo, a pesar de su enorme éxito y del atractivo que, sin duda, tienen sus temas estrella (felicidad, bienestar, optimismo), carece de bases científicas y filosóficas sobre las que pudiera sostenerse con solidez. Se empieza por señalar que la PsP tiene un origen más acorde con un movimiento religioso que con el desarrollo de una ciencia. Más importante, se argumenta que la PsP sufre de ciertas falacias como son una supuesta ecuación de la felicidad y el carácter inherentemente positivo de ciertas características psicológicas. Se argumenta, asimismo, que la eficacia atribuida a la PsP no cuadra con la evidencia disponible, con particular referencia al cáncer. En cuanto a la psicoterapia positiva para aumentar la felicidad y disminuir la depresión, no parece diferenciarse del placebo. Por más que la PsP exhibe el lado positivo, no deja de tener su lado negativo, como la división de la psicología, la tiranía de la actitud positiva y un optimismo sin escrúpulos. Con todo, la cuestión de fondo es que la felicidad no es un principio de la vida sobre el que pueda establecerse una ciencia, de acuerdo con el argumento filosófico final.

Palabras clave: Psicología positiva, Felicidad, Optimismo, Tiranía de la actitud positiva, Mito de la felicidad.

If Adam and Eve had remained in Paradise, they would have been immensely happy, but would have died of boredom, said Kant. What Kant said is, in fact, really better yet: "Just as false is the idea that if Adam and Eve had remained in Paradise, they would have done nothing but sat together and sung Arcadian songs and observed the beauty of Nature. Boredom would certainly have martyred them as well as it does other men in similar positions" (Kant, 1803/2003, p.63).

Making us happy is what PPs apparently proposes to do as a science of happiness or well-being (Lyubomirsky, 2008); Vázquez and Hervás, 2009a). However PPs leaves much to be desired as a science, and behind its apparent innocence, lies a negative side. Its intended

scientific character may be more than anything a stamp of scientism, a way to cover up its ideological character within traditional positive thought and current consumer capitalism (Becker and Marecek, 2008; Binkley, 2011; Cabas and Sánchez, 2012; Christopher and Hickinbottom, 2008). With respect to its negative side, its positive attitude has been said to have become a tyranny (Ehrenreich, 2011; Held, 2002; 2004). A legion of "happiologists", not only positive psychologists, but also coaches, motivational speakers and entrepreneurs in the self-help industry, preach this new psychology as if they were promoting some kind of religion (Lazarus, 2003a).

Being positive and positive thought are already so common place in conversation and dissertations on how to live right that they might be slogans for good manners. These *mantras* remind one of the sort of *sympathetic magic* James Frazer talks about in *The Golden Bough*,

Correspondence: Marino Pérez-Álvarez. Universidad de Oviedo. Facultad de Psicología. Plaza Feijóo, s/n. 33003-Oviedo. España. E-mail: marino@uniovi.es



which consists of believing that “like breeds like” (Frazer, 1922/1981, p. 34), in our case, positivity attracts positive things. The successful sale of Rhonda Byrne’s *The Secret* is today a version of the secret attraction or hidden congeniality between similarities which Frazer found typical of what he calls primitive, savage and barbarous peoples. *The Secret* is based on the “Law of Attraction” a so-called “law of nature”, according to which, “you become what you think of most” (The Secret, p. 23 and p. 27; Byrne, 2007), such that it would seem that “the secret” to our happiness is in positive thinking.

The objection to PPs does not imply defense of negative psychology, but psychology, without the need of dividing it into positive and negative. The declaration of release and even of independence of PPs from psychology is in itself another of its negative aspects. This article approaches these questions in six parts. The first recalls the birth of PPs, in as much as birth can tell us something about the child. The second confronts its scientific quality, and the third its practical utility. The fourth emphasizes some negative aspects, and the fifth questions what is positive about it. The sixth shows the insolvency of happiness as a principle of life and of psychology.

EPIPHANY OF PPs

PPs is probably the strongest movement in psychology thus far in the 21st century. Launched in 2000 as a new focus of psychology for studying subjective positive experience, individual positive traits and positive institutions as appropriate of happiness and well-being, PPs has become well established in scholarship and in postgraduate training, as well as in popular psychology. Thus it has led to a whole genre of literature from scientific to self-help built around happiness (“the happiness industry”). The justification and *raison d’être* of PPs is promotion of positive aspects on a scientific basis, assuming that traditional psychology had concentrated on negativeness, most especially pathology and suffering. Scientific study of happiness and well-being would be immensely novel. However, PPs is not new and more than science, it would seem a religious movement: an epiphany.

Four revelations

PPs has a curious internal history, with two versions told by its founder, Martin Seligman, one for children, the other secret.

The *children’s* story takes place in the garden of Seligman’s house when his five-year-old daughter scolds her

father for being such a grouch. “This was no less than my epiphany”, says Seligman (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6). This epiphany consisted not just of one but three revelations. Seligman realized that bringing up children is also identifying and cultivating their strongest qualities. He also realized that he was a grouch. But the most important revelation was in the lessons for psychology as a science and profession. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi had already had his own *positive* epiphany in postwar Europe, when he saw that people were able to remain integral and sane in spite of the chaos around them (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6). Prior to Seligman’s epiphany, but after Csikszentmihalyi’s, by happy coincidence, a sort of serendipity, they had already met when they both decided to take their vacation in the same place in the winter of 1997, as revealed in this case by Csikszentmihalyi. Both “felt that psychology had become so boring with its narrow-minded focus on pathology” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, p. 113). The rest is the PPS that flourishes today.

The secret story, the “real reason that positive psychology started, has been kept secret until now,” as revealed by Seligman himself in 2011, in the first chapter of *Flourish*. When he was elected president of the APA in 1997, among the many e-mails received was a mysterious one that said, “Why don’t you come see me in New York?” signed with initials. It turned out to be a lawyer for The *Atlantic Philanthropies* foundation, set up by billionaire Charles Feeney to finance philanthropic projects. The foundation was interested in winners like Seligman, who took advantage to tell them about the PPs initiative. “A month later,” says Seligman, “I received a check for 1.5 million dollars,” with which he started to get ahead (*Flourish*, p. 22). Thinking of PPs and receiving a check for a million and a half dollars would seem like an example of the law of attraction *The Secret* is based on and a testimony of the type found in that book.

In addition to unveiling the secret of this anonymous philanthropist, he tells us what might seem to be another revelation: the birth of a new theory. Now in 2011, in *Flourish*, happiness no longer the epicenter of PPs, as promulgated in his 2002 book, *Authentic Happiness*. Instead of happiness, *Flourish* proposes the well-being theory, concentrated on personal growth. The “Well-being construct, not the entity of satisfaction with life, is the central theme of positive psychology,” (*Flourish*, pp. 30-31). And there are five elements of well-being: positive emotion (the pleasant life), engagement (flow, being absor-



bed in the present), meaning (meaningful life), achievement (accomplishment for its “own sake”), and relationships (others). As if it were a Papal encyclical, Seligman now solemnly proclaims that he has developed a new theory of well-being: “I now think that the topic of positive psychology is well-being, that the gold standard for measuring well-being is flourishing, and that the goal of positive psychology is to increase flourishing,” (*Flourish*, p. 28)

Flourish tells about the flourishing of PPs, how it has extended to education, health, politics and the military. Application of PPs (happiness and well-being) to soldier training might seem surprising, but it is one of his latest flourishings. Seligman takes advantage of this book to “justify himself” for “mistreatment” of animals on which he developed the theory of learned helplessness which flourished in its day. “I can’t tell you what it cost me to inflict suffering on the animals,” he says (*Flourish*, p. 220).

Old wine in new bottles

Beyond this personal history, the fact is that neither the doctrine nor the name of PPs is new, but just “old wine in new bottles” (Kristjánsson, 2012). In fact, the success of PPs in sinking in so fast is that it is raining on wet ground. The propitious terrain which PPs impregnates is no more than the traditional American religious culture secularized as “positive thinking” and spread as self-help literature (Cabanas and Sánchez, 2012). The name itself, “positive psychology” arose in the context of humanistic psychology in a chapter entitled, “Toward Positive Psychology” in a book by Abraham Maslow in 1954 (Froh, 2004). What happens is that positive psychologists do not want to identify themselves as or be identified with this tradition, either with the positive thinking movement, or with humanistic psychology. PPs is labelled as a new science. In the founding letter of PPs, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, although they do recognize a humanistic psychology background, regret, however, that it “...did not attract much of a cumulative empirical base and was scattered into a myriad of self-help movements” (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.7).

Recognized followers of PPs in Spain have also distanced themselves from this tradition. Gonzalo Hervás, for example, says that PPs “...has nothing to do with the extensive movement of ‘positive thinking’ in North America” (Hervás, 2009, p.25). Beatriz Vera Poseck almost swears that, “*Positive psychology* is not ... a philosophical or spiritual movement, does not intend to promote

spiritual or human growth by means of doubtful established methods. It is not an exercise in self-help or a magical method for achieving happiness,” (Vera Poseck, 2006, p.4, italics in original text). In fact, however, as Edgar Cabanas and José Carlos Sánchez show in this same issue, PPs has roots in what these authors call “positive” individualism, development of a process of secularization of American post-Calvinist metaphysics that opens the way through self-help literature and today has achieved a flourishing happiness industry (Cabanas and Sánchez, 2012; see also Becker and Marecek, 2008; Christopher and Hickinbottom, 2008; Ehrenreich, 2011; Fernández-Ríos and Novo, 2012).

It is not surprising then that pastoral theology has found PPs affinity, for example, in exercising gratitude, with biblical roots. “I will give thanks to the Lord with all my heart; I will talk about all thy marvelous works,” says the Book of Psalms (Moschella, 2011), p.7). Other exercises, in addition to gratitude, such as forgiving and examining negative thoughts, derive from the religious mind-cure movement. Where the Calvinist struggles against sinful thought, the positive thinker fights against negative thought. All these practices, says Catherine Albanese, are based on an idea which doubtless, “...has a close relationship with magical thinking [medieval], by which trained and controlled imagination would act on and influence the world, activity which is shown as an effective way of attracting desired and miraculous changes in oneself” (quoted by Cabanas, 2011, p.26).

From its content, but also from its defense from criticism, “they seem to be promoting a religion,” says Lazarus, “a vision from on high, which is falsely clothed in a claim to science that never materializes,” (Lazarus, 2003a, p. 176). “It may be illustrative,” says Prieto-Ursúa, “That one of the foundations that most promotes and subsidizes positive psychology studies, the John Templeton Foundation, ‘promotes the appreciation of the critical importance [...] of the moral and spiritual dimensions of life [...]. What can research tell us about God, about the nature of divine action in the world, its meaning and purpose? What spiritual insight can be found in the way in which science reveals nature and human creativity?’” (Prieto-Ursúa, 2006, p. 325). Seligman’s research must have been important to the John Templeton Foundation to have recently offered him 6000000 dollars (Binkley, 2011, p. 374).

The PPs drift toward self-help literature should not be surprising either, beginning with Seligman’s *Authentic*



Happiness in 2002, the subtitle-label of which is already self-declarative, "Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment," and *Flourish*, which says in the first line, "This book will help you flourish." (P. 15). Csikszentmihalyi had already written *Flow* in 1990, the Spanish version of which (*Fluir*), was subtitled, "Una psicología de la felicidad" (A psychology of happiness), explained how to achieve optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 2005). Sonja Lyubomirsky, in the *Science of Happiness*, offers "a proven method to get a full and happy life" (Lyubomirsky, 2008).

If the leaders themselves are in the business, it is needless to mention the enormous amount of "junk literature" that lives off the "happiness industry", no matter if it was written by famous psychiatrists, psychologists or economists. In fact, it is hard to tell the difference between self-help literature and the supposedly scientific PPs literature (Cabanas, 2011), because of their narrative strategies and the happiness doctrine they preach. The narrative strategy of the scientific PPs leaders quoted is not out of keeping with the "narrative strategies for therapeutic promises" characteristic of the self-help genre: the reader protagonist, the appellative structure of the text seeking complicity like an "invisible friend", etc. (Viñas Piquer, 2012). Concerning the propaganda doctrine, it is not easy to distinguish what the Dalai Lama (1999) says in the *Art of Happiness*, for example, from what Seligman says in *Authentic Happiness*, aside from the fact that the former president of the APA may love the comparison

with the leader of Tibet, from guru to guru (Table 1). The solution may be found in Cabanas (2011, p. 67).

PPs: A WILD GOOSE CHASE

In spite of its scientific show, PPs as a science leaves much to be desired. In fact, it has been criticized for scientific weaknesses of all kinds, seen, in vain, beginning with the article, already classic, by Richard Lazarus under the title, "Does the positive psychology movement have legs?" (Lazarus, 2003b). PPs goes on, plagued by pseudoscientific premises, not to mention tautological arguments (almost saying that being well causes well-being or that well-being is related to satisfaction), abuse of correlations as if they were causal relationships (making one think, for example, that well-being causes health instead of health well-being, if in fact they are sometimes not the same or both depend on third variables), experiments without a special theoretical basis or challenging controls, common sense findings, practically demonstrating that being well is more satisfying than being ill, etc. (Fernández-Ríos and Cornes, 2009; Fernández-Ríos and Novo, 2012; Kristjansson, 2010; Miller, 2008; Prieto-Ursúa, 2006).

PPs as a form of witchcraft

PPs is a mine full of examples in psychology which Stanislav Andreski identified as "the social sciences as forms of witchcraft" referring in his case to all sociology and economy, to the extent that they show the obvious with a great show of methodology (Andreski, 1972). Thus in PPs literature it is not hard to find results such as, "people who show more perceived satisfaction in these basic needs show higher levels of daily well-being," and "daily fluctuation in satisfying these needs is associated with fluctuation in well-being experienced from day to day". "Likewise, several studies have shown that those with higher levels of well-being are persons with goals coherent with their interests, values and needs" (Vázquez, Hervás and Ho, 2006, p. 411), as if the contrary were to be expected. "For example, a couple or marriage will be more satisfying if the partners are able to allow and promote each other's satisfaction in the six areas of psychological well-being. A company organization or school will also generate more well-being if they provide the necessary nutrients for generating satisfaction in each of the areas of well-being proposed by Ryff," (Hervás, 2009, p.33). Similarly, an economist would be infallible if s/he said that the more income that is contributed by the partners,

TABLE 1
WHAT DID THE DALAI LAMA SAY AND WHAT DID SELIGMAN SAY?

<p>"It is important to distinguish your momentary happiness from an enduring level of happiness. Momentary happiness can easily be increased by any number of uplifts, such as chocolate, a comedy film, a back rub, a compliment, flowers, or a new blouse. This book is not a guide to increasing the number of transient bursts of happiness in your life. No one is more expert on this topic than you are. The challenge is to raise your enduring level of happiness, and merely increasing the number of bursts of momentary positive feelings will not accomplish this."</p>	<p>"If you develop a pure, sincere motive, if you are motivated by the desire to help, based on kindness, compassion and respect, you can do any job in any area and function more effectively, with less fear or anxiety, without fear of what others say or whether in the end you will be successful and can reach your goal. Although the individual may not reach his goal, he can feel good about merely having made the effort. But if he is poorly motivated, although people praise him or he meets the goals he had set for himself, he will not feel happy."</p>
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the more money a couple or marriage has. And talking about a quality of life therapy, the relationship between “satisfaction with your life” and “well-being or happiness” is proposed. Given a combination of these variables, it is not so easy to tell which is the scientific one, or, for the case in point, the one in the original model (Table 2). The solution in Hervás, Sánchez and Vázquez (2008, p. 65).

A study done by the Coca Cola Institute of Happiness and the Complutense University of Madrid for the purpose, among others, of finding the relationships existing between state of health perceived and level of happiness of Spaniards and whether happy people are less likely to have health problems concludes that, when there is a health problem, happier people feel healthier than those who are less happy. It also confirms the relationship between well-being and health and the importance of family and friends as a factor helping one to feel good. (Instituto Coca-Cola de la Felicidad, 2012). Not to recriminate Coca Cola, which wishes to advertise associating itself with the push that happiness has today, but it would be unfortunate that such *findings* were the result of studies blessed by national agencies and funded with public monies and that new generations of researchers in psychology believed that it is of interest to study and find associations between satisfaction, well-being and feeling good.

The fallacy of the happiness equation

A very useful equation of happiness circulates in PPs literature, including books by more serious authors, for example, Seligman’s *Authentic Happiness*, *Applied Positive Psychology* by Carmelo Vázquez and Gonzalo Hervás (2009) and *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want* by Lyubomirsky. Notice how Lyubomirsky uses it. The author of the *How of Happiness*, after saying that the star of her book “is

science” and presenting herself as a “research scientist” and not a “self-help guru”, leads us to believe that what she is going to say is well-founded. In fact, she already begins with pseudoscientific statements in the first chapter entitled, “Can you be happier?” based on the abovementioned “happiness equation” where Happiness (H) depends on a set-point (S) determined genetically (S=50%), on circumstances of life (C=10%), and intentional activities (A) “what we do in our daily life and the way we think” (A=40%). $H=S+C+A$. The answer to the title of the chapter is that you can be 40% happier than the set-point.

The question here is that no matter how many studies are cited to supposedly support it, such an equation is completely gratuitous, pseudoscientific. When Barbara Ehrenreich confronted Seligman on the nature of this equation, he could not account for it (Ehrenreich, 2011, p. 189). Without going any further, the units for H (“perhaps the number happy thoughts per day?”) would have to be the same as for S, C and A, so pears are not confused with apples. The truth is that the happiness equation holds up no better than the service sheet of the Napoleonic soldier who added up his age, battles won and wounds received (that is, for example, $60+14+8=82$). In its gratuity, the equation reveals the conservative and subjectivist nature of the science of happiness, with the supposedly 50% genetic setpoint, the meager value of circumstances, and the emphasis on thought (what you think) with respect to intentional activity. As *the Science of Well-being* says, “in spite of what might be expected, other economic factors (such as access to drinking water or malnutrition levels), factors related to freedom (e.g., the possibility of divorce, right to abortion or suicide rates), to equality and social climate (illiteracy rates, trust in family and other institutions or social inequality rates, etc.) or to population pressure (birth rate, population density, etc.) do not seem to have a significant relations-

TABLE 2
WHICH VERSION IS THE SCIENTIFIC ONE?

<p>“It is suggested that the affective balance, defined as a greater relative presence of <i>positive emotions</i> than negative in daily life of the individual is the consequence, in the first place of a person’s <i>well-being</i> or of <i>happiness</i> and in the second, <i>satisfaction with his life</i>.”</p>
<p>“It is suggested that a person’s <i>well-being</i> or <i>happiness</i> is the consequence first of <i>satisfaction with his life</i> and second, the affective balance, defined as a greater relative presence of <i>positive emotions</i> than negative in the individual’s daily life.”</p>
<p>“It is suggested that a person’s <i>well-being</i> or <i>happiness</i> is the consequence in the first place of the affective balance, defined as a greater relative presence of <i>positive emotions</i> than negative in the individual’s daily life, and in the second, of <i>satisfaction with his life</i>.”</p>
<p>“It is suggested that a person’s <i>well-being</i> or <i>happiness</i> is the consequence in the first place of the affective balance, defined as a greater relative presence of <i>positive emotions</i> than negative in the individual’s daily life, and in the second, the person’s <i>well-being</i> or <i>happiness</i>.” Etc.</p>



hip to people's happiness (Vázquez and Hervás, 2009b, p. 131, stress in the original).

With all the above, the happiness equation does not impede political use. Thus Lyubomirsky refers to the Kingdom of Bhutan as, "the last Buddhist kingdom of the Himalayas," which apparently has adopted the Gross Interior Happiness instead of the GDP as a criterion of the state of well-being. Along the same line is the proposal of Lord Richard Layard, economist in the London School of Economics, inspired and acclaimed by Seligman in *Flourish*. It is not clear how the king of Bhutan does it, but the question that would be posed, according to the equation, is what political form would only be able to improve happiness 10%, unless it included equipping every citizen with rose-colored glasses to see things more optimistically, and thereby improve 40%, which added to the 10% of circumstances would make 50%. As *The Science of Well-being* says, due to PPs there are already "corrective glasses that can help us find [...] that little island called happiness," so that "only you decide whether to use them" (Fernández-Berrocal and Extremera, 2009, p. 252). A good king, supposedly like the one in Bhutan, would encourage his citizens to use happiness glasses, that is, would contract happiologists for the education and health system, who would, it is assumed, give many short courses and workshops on happiness, and in time, on self-esteem. If anyone is not happy, it is because he does not want to be.

As just another sample of the gratuity of the happiness equation, Lyubomirsky, after saying, for example, that neither more money nor a relationship "make you much happier" (p. 30), emphasizes a few pages further on, without even finishing the first chapter, that among the "advantages of being happier" (in addition to feeling good) are the greater "probabilities of marrying and staying married" (pp. 41-42). Seligman also talks about happiness "beyond money" in *Flourish*, saying on one hand that money does not make you happy, and on the other, that among the advantages of being happy is the probability of earning more money.

So, without even finishing the first chapter of the *How of Happiness*, you can see that it is the rhetoric of scientism. The bad part, although good for this *literature*, is that people do not notice and accept it as *scientific* literature. It looks like what Luis Fernández-Ríos and Mercedes Novo say about the uncritical reception of PPs in Spain is true and that "...Spanish psychology often seems to have stopped thinking," (Fernández-Ríos and Novo, 2012, p. 337).

Lack of inherent positive nature of psychological traits

In addition to the fallacy of the happiness equation, PPs fails in its central assumption that certain psychological traits and processes like optimism, forgiveness, benevolent interpretation and kindness are inherently positive and beneficial to well-being, when the evidence shows that everything depends on context. Under certain circumstances, these characteristics are negative and prejudicial, as shown by James McNulty and Frank Fincham (McNulty and Fincham, 2012). The *evidence* that McNulty and Fincham examine discloses that the basis of PPs is derived above all from longitudinal studies related to married couples.

For instance, *optimistic expectations* about changes in marital satisfaction depend on the ability of the spouses to confirm them. Their relationship does not improve because they are optimistic or because they receive an infusion of optimism. Furthermore, optimists are less likely to be able to get unhooked from the game, even after a long losing streak. Being an optimist can be the perdition of a gambler, and not just inveterate gamblers, as seen below with regard to unscrupulous optimism. *Forgiveness* is a process that can be beneficial or prejudicial depending on the characteristics of the relationship in which it occurs. Although forgiveness helps maintain satisfaction in couples who rarely engage in hostile behavior, it is associated with growing dissatisfaction in those who have frequent arguments. Even the pastoral theology which hails PPs as "one of ours", admonishes Seligman for his excessive confidence in forgiveness, which can sometimes be more harmful than beneficial (Moschella, 2011, p.8). (In view of this admonishment, it would seem that Seligman is more Catholic than pastoral theology). Favorable *interpretation* of the causes of negative experiences is not always beneficial. The most benevolent (for example, believing that the spouse was not responsible for undesirable behavior) contributes to the satisfaction of the relationship when problems are minor, but when they are more severe, less benevolent interpretations are more positive. Furthermore, optimistic interpretations of one's own negative conduct could undermine motivation to seek improvement. Even *kindness* can have pernicious implications. While infinite kindness may lead to abuse from others, the lack of kindness or friendliness (consistently, for example, in rejection or criticism) can be beneficial in a couple's arguments.



In short, such so-called positive processes may be harmful, while those assumed to be negative can sometimes be beneficial for well-being (McNulty and Fincham, 2012). Everything depends on the context in which they occur and nothing seems to be inherent *per se*, contrary to the essentialism and ingenuity that seem to preside in “happiology”. The processes that benefit people in optimal circumstances could harm them in suboptimum circumstances. As these authors conclude, “A sensible understanding of the human condition requires it to be acknowledged that psychological traits and processes are not inherently positive or negative. Whether they have positive or negative implications depends on the context in which they operate. Psychology is not positive or negative - Psychology is Psychology.” (McNulty and Fincham, 2012, pp. 107-108).

After over a decade, just as the first great criticism it received said then (Lazarus, 2003b), PPs is still a science without head or tail, a criticism *received* like a stirred up hornet nest, as Lazarus himself says in his reply (Lazarus, 2003b, p.174). What PPs does have are *light feet* for taking advantage of its huge momentum and continuing onward (Lyubomirsky and Abbe, 2003, p. 135), as if nothing had happened, without basis and by headless allusion. If there is nothing inherently positive in psychological traits and everything depends on context, as it seems, we again find ourselves with the old psychology. This was a wild goose chase.

USEFUL AS A COSMETIC AND PLACEBO MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE

PPs history may be more like a religious foundation (epiphany) than development of a science and as a science it has neither head nor tail, but could well be an approach and a practice which, in spite of everything, is useful and beneficial. Two areas of recognized PPS reference in health are reviewed below, the spirit of the fight against cancer and psychotherapy for happiness and depression.

The cosmetics of joy for cancer

A review of highlighted PPs factors related to health, such as “spirit of fight” against cancer, the effects of intervention cultivating positive psychological states on immune system functioning, finding benefits in adversity, and the apotheosis of PPs, posttraumatic growth, have all been shown to have no empirical basis (Coyne and Tennen, 2010). In their enthusiasm for advancing PPs, their defenders have created an abyss between what they pre-

ach and scientific evidence. As Coyne and Tennen say, in each of these areas, PPs researchers have been indifferent to the evidence available (e.g., overlooking inconclusive results and evidence to the contrary), and have applied methods and designs that are completely inadequate for their arguments, (e.g., correlational studies, designs without adequate controls, hypotheses without basis) (Coyne and Tennen, 2010).

Thus studies do not show that the “spirit of fight” has any value as a factor in the prognosis of cancer and much less as a causal factor. Not belittling the “spirit of fight” as a useful attitude for many people, their recommendation as a supposedly scientific finding to be applied in practice may in reality become a tyranny. Such tyranny was observed and experienced by Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Smile or Die*, already cited above, as a cancer patient (Ehrenreich, 2011). “But rather than providing emotional sustenance,” says Ehrenreich, “the sugar-coating of cancer can exact a dreadful cost. First, it requires the denial of understandable feelings of anger and fear, all of which must be buried under a cosmetic layer of cheer. This is a great convenience for health workers and even the friends of the person afflicted, who might prefer fake cheer to complaining. But it is not so easy on the afflicted. [...] it takes effort to maintain the upbeat demeanor expected by others – effort that can no longer be justified as a contribution to long-term survival,” (*Smile or die*, p. 50). Ehrenreich argues further against the role of the immune system as an explanation for the effect of positive psychological states, among the intervention for which is, it might be added, that ridiculous comic display in which “strong, aggressive” lymphocytes kill “weak disoriented” cancer cells. The review by Coyne and Tennen shows the lack of evidence and even implausibility of the causal relationships adduced and publicized in popular literature between changes in immune functioning and the progression of cancer (Coyne and Tennen, 2010).

As Ehrenreich says, “Breast cancer, I can now report, did not make me prettier or stronger, more feminine or spiritual. What it gave me, if you want to call this a “gift”, was a very personal, agonizing encounter with an ideological force in American culture that I had not been aware of before – one that encourages us to deny reality, submit cheerfully to misfortune and blame only ourselves for our fate,” (*Smile or die*, p. 53). James Coyne et al. wonder why PPs has such prestige in cancer, when it is not justified by the evidence. The answer they give is



that established (publicized) affirmations about PPs and cancer are, like legends in a movement, resistant to lack of evidence, especially when they show favorable correlations and set aside the unfavorable. Thus, although studies show that pessimism predicts health as well as optimism, only optimism is exhibited (Coyne, Tennen and Ranchor, 2010), and although the mean effect size between optimism and health was 0.14 and between pessimism and health was 0.17, the title and emphasis of the article is optimism and physical health" (Rasmussen, Scheier and Greenhouse, 2009). But the notion that being optimistic improves health is already a mantra promoting research on PPs interventions and marketing PPs as a business (Coyne et al., 2010).

As Coyne et al conclude, if PPs continues appealing to scientific evidence, it is time to acknowledge that:

- a) The lack of evidence connecting positive psychological states with the biology of cancer,
- b) The evidence existing that psychological intervention does not prolong survival and
- c) That no causal links between immune function parameters studied and positive states and psychological intervention have yet been established (Coyne et al., 2010).

More coherent than PPs would be a human diversity psychology in which seven-time winner of the Tour de France, Lance Armstrong, who declared that cancer made him a better person, and Maarten van der Weijden, Olympic gold-medal winner in swimming, who says that stories that you have to think positively could become a burden for the patients (quoted by Coyne, et al., 2010), and Barbara Ehrenreich, the "indignant" patient fed up with the "pink-ribbon culture" (*Smile or die*, Chapter 1) would all be covered.

With respect to the benefits of adversities and posttraumatic growth, PPs lacks a basis for understanding the phenomenon or prospective studies that demonstrate it, insisting on them with more faith than proof (Coyne and Tennen, 2010). All of the above, without denying the well-known phenomenon, before and aside from PPs, that "if it doesn't kill you it will make you stronger." What is happening here is that PPs is passing off what is already well known as something they just discovered. As pointed out by María Prieto-Ursúa, PPs, "Has appropriated, for example, the concept of *resilience* or post-traumatic growth as if nothing had been said about it before, or as if it had never been said that it was valuable," (Prieto-Ursúa, 2006, p. 323).

Positive placebo for happiness and depression

The replication of the work by Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson (2005), often referred to as empirical evidence of interventions based on PPs, shows that results on increasing happiness and lessening depression are indistinguishable from the placebo (Mongrain and Anselmo-Matthews, 2012). The original study by Seligman et al (2005) would have shown the supposedly specific efficacy of "positive psychology exercises" compared to an "expectation control" group to counteract any possible "common factor" in generating expectations of improvement implied by the various therapeutic interventions. The study by Mongrain and Anselmo-Matthews (2012) replicates the one by Seligman et al (2005) and adds a new control group called "positive placebo". In this new group, positive aspects are added to the mere common expectations of the control group above that make the placebo-intervention more challenging for the positive psychology exercises.

The participants (n=344) were recruited from ads in Facebook with the headline "Feel better: Participate in Project HOPE (Harnessing One's Personal Excellence), displayed for Canadian users over age 18. The participants in the Seligman et al (2005) study were recruited through his self-help book *Authentic Happiness* (Seligman, 2002). In both studies, the participants had to visit a website to do the exercises, including filling in questionnaires on Happiness and Depression, before beginning the exercises, at the end of the session, and in several follow-ups.

The positive psychology exercises were *Three Good Things* and *Your Signature Strengths in a New Way*, the ones that were the most effective in the original Seligman et al. study (2005). The rationale with which the interventions were presented are shown in Table 3, for each of the groups: the two positive psychology exercises (Three good things and Use of your signature strengths) and the two control conditions (Expectations control and positive placebo) (Mongrain and Anselmo-Matthews, 2012).

The results were that, although the positive psychology exercises surpassed the effect of the Expectations Control Group in stimulating Happiness (the only one used in the original study), that was not the case in the Positive Placebo Group (added in this replication study). Neither did the positive psychology studies lower depression more than the Positive Placebo during the follow-up. As the study concludes, the results of the positive psychology studies were indistinguishable from the placebo effect



(Mongrain and Anselmo-Matthews, 2012). It is conceivable that the positive psychotherapy was positive the same way as the placebo, which it will be recalled, literally means “will please”. There does not seem to be anything any more specific even in the best positive psychology exercises than what is already positive in talking about positive pleasant things. The biggest novelty in the positive psychology exercises does not seem to be anything but a scientism wrapping and the enthusiasm for the novelty in agreement with the scientific label that PPs bears.

The “positive” part of positive psychotherapy, as any clinician can see, is generic, with a budget in common with psychotherapy. As Cabanas and Sánchez point out, “what seems clearly valid in positive psychology is rather a generic trait of any process for facing problems, the importance of which is assumed by all psychotherapy, and common sense, that is, the advisability of keeping an open attitude that helps the individual understand his situation and effectively take advantage of the resources he has in hand to overcome daily problems. Nevertheless, it is desirable to face a problem by seeking alternative response repertoires, refocusing the situation, and keeping up enough trust and hope to avoid sudden re-

jection and feelings of helplessness (Cabanas and Sánchez, 2012, p. 180).

THE NEGATIVE SIDE OF PPs

As much as it shines and exhibits the *positive* side of the human being, of life and of the psychology itself concerned with it, and beyond its intended usefulness, PPs still has a dark negative side.

Division of psychology

Right off, it introduces a division in psychology, automatically leading to an understanding that there is a negative psychology: the rest of psychology, and in particular, clinical psychology, which would concentrate especially on negative aspects. In PPs, psychology would be divided between what concentrates on pathology and what concentrates on happiology. Besides dividing academic psychology, PPs also divides popular psychology, trying to separate, those who are positive, optimistic or cool on one hand, from those who are negative, pessimistic or “toxic” on the other. In this division, pessimistic thoughts and uncomfortable emotions are anathema, like a religion that protects virtues against sins.

TABLE 3
RATIONALE OF EACH OF THE STUDY CONDITIONS

Experimental conditions		Control conditions	
<p><i>Three Good Things:</i> “We think too much about what goes wrong and not enough about what goes right in our lives. Of course, it sometimes makes sense to analyze bad events so we can learn from them and avoid them in the future. However, people tend to spend more time than thinking about what is bad in life than is helpful. Worse, this focus on negative events sets us up for anxiety and depression. One way to keep this from happening is to get better at thinking about and savoring what went well. In order to develop this skill, we propose that you visit the website daily for seven days and report three good things that happened to you today and why they happened.”</p>	<p><i>Use of Your Signature Strengths in a New Way:</i> “Honesty, Loyalty, Perseverance, Creativity, Kindness, Wisdom, Courage, Fairness. These and sixteen other character strengths are valued in every culture of the world. We believe you can get more satisfaction from life if you learn to identify which of these strengths you have in abundance and then use them as much as you can in work, in love and in play. These exercises consist of two parts. You will fill in a questionnaire that gives you feedback on your strong points. This will take you 45 minutes. The next day you will be asked to use these strengths in new ways each day for a week and every day you write what you did.”</p>	<p><i>Expectations Control (early memories):</i> “Life not examined is not worth living’ (Socrates). The importance of knowing yourself and of understanding has been recognized for a long time. We believe that a strong sense of self and understanding the factors that have made you the person you are today are essential components of well-being. Our early experiences can influence us and play a role in how we think and act later in life. It may be important to think about these early experiences to understand the person you are today. Every night for the next week, spend about 10 minutes before you go to bed to do this exercise. To do it you have to enter this page and write about an early memory.”</p>	<p><i>Positive Placebo early positive memories; the following is added to the Expectations Control:</i> ... “Careful consideration of our past can help us to improve our understanding of who we are today and achieve self-acceptance and well-being, particularly, when we focus on positive aspects. Every night for the next week spend about ten minutes before you go to bed to do this exercise. To do it you have to enter this website and write about a <i>positive</i> early memory.”</p>
<p><i>Results: The positive psychology exercises were indistinguishable from those of the placebo effect, either in increasing happiness or in lowering depression</i></p>			



However, emotions and psychological traits are not “positive” or “negative” and their harmful or beneficial impact depends on the specific context and motives involved, as mentioned above, and this has always been well known in psychology. Thus “negative” emotions like anger and ire could be positive, adaptive and motivating for correcting personal and social errors, just as unhappiness and dissatisfaction can move one to identify and change improvable situations. “Positive” emotions like optimism and euphoria can be negative, for example, when “they hook” you on tasks or ventures which will probably result in a loss. If rumination on “negative” thoughts can easily lead to depression, rumination on thoughts about how well you feel and how happy and “cool” you are lead without further difficulty to mania (Gruber, 2011). Even happiness itself may be deleterious as shown below (Gruber, Mauss, & Tamir, 2011).

Although positive psychologists recognize that this division is unsustainable and would even say that they do not argue it at all, the fact is that the PPs password is emphasis on overdimensioning “positive” emotions and characteristics and making the “negative” anathema. At least, this is what remains in the air after the dust cloud PPs has raised. Air thinned by the tyranny of the positive attitude.

The tyranny of the positive attitude

There is nothing wrong about wanting to change your life for the better. However, having to be happy at all costs can become tyrannical. The 1980s song “Don’t worry, be happy,” has gone on to be the same old song in the first decade of the new century. Barbara Held has shown and condemned the *Tyranny of the positive attitude in America*, and not just there (Held, 2002). As this author says, the rise in pressure on people to be happy and carefree, laugh and look at the positive side, no matter how hard life is, can do more harm than good. “I call this pressure,” says Held, “tyranny of the positive attitude, because if you feel bad for some reason and you can’t put on a happy face, as hard as you try, you could end up feeling worse. Not only do you feel bad because of what is happening to you, but also because you feel guilty for not feeling good. You can feel like you have failed because you are unable to keep up a positive attitude,” (Held, 2002, pp. 986-987). Recall what was mentioned above about the positive attitude in cancer.

If, as PPs assures, we know the keys to happiness, its logical derivation and the responsibility of its discoverers is

to extend it to the whole population. Is there any excuse for not being happy? If the means (the abovementioned “corrective lenses”) for helping to find happiness exist, “deciding to use them depends only on yourself,” (Fernández-Berrocal and Extremera, 2009, p. 252). “Not feeling bad in life should not be enough. We should have more ambitious goals and have an authentic intellectual and professional commitment with the promotion of well-being in the broad sense. Is it possible that our patient does not already have depression, anxiety or psychotic symptoms? Does he feel in harmony with life? Can he develop himself further, etc.?” (Vázquez, 2009, p.24).

Edgar Cabanas very clearly suggests the psychological consequences of this command (Cabanas, 2011). They keep insisting that “just not feeling bad in life should not be enough,” which implies that being happy is a question that goes beyond being reasonably well. The mandate that we “should have more ambitious goals” in order to feel “really good” traps the individual in an unending project, since neither the popular self-help literature nor PPs offer concrete criteria on what is “really good” beyond the subjective criteria of each. So we could continually ask ourselves if we are not feeling “really good”, because subjectively, when are we really, in some sense, feeling better than good? The most important psychological consequence is that the individual embarks on a project in which he can rarely be at his best. Recognizing that you are not happy is distressing because then your life seems to be a complete failure. This “tyranny” can become a psychopathological condition, already identified as the “happiness trap” (Harris, 2010), along with those described from the perspective of hyperreflection (Pérez Álvarez, 2012, Chapter 3).

Unscrupulous optimism

PPs has contributed to the propagation and “scientific” legitimization of optimism and happiness as safeguards for getting along in life. It is an *unscrupulous* optimism, to use an expression of Schopenhauer, in reference to a view of the world as full of opportunities and a positive attitude about being and achieving whatever you want. The literature specialized in the subject reminds us of the *candid* optimism of *Pollyanna* and *Pangloss*. As you will recall, *Pollyanna* is a little girl, the main character in the novel of the same name by Eleonor Porter, in 1913, brought up in the optimism and in the game of finding the good side of anything to cheer up everyone’s life,



and Pangloss is the main character in *Candide or Optimism*, in 1750, where Voltaire parodies Leibnizian optimism according to which “everything happens for the best in this, the best of all possible worlds.”

Setting aside the discussion of whether intelligent or realistic optimism is something more than a tautology defined afterward by facts (if things went well it is because you were intelligent, etc.), the question is that the culture of optimism and of happiness can be deleterious, in spite of everything. After such an infusion of positive attitudes and optimism and such a search for happiness, we might wonder if this does not have to do with the current epidemic of narcissism (Twenge and Campbell, 2010), with the *generation me*, like the young people who are surer of themselves and more assertive and better prepared, and nevertheless, are unhappier than ever (Twenge, 2006), and with the paradoxical decline in feminine happiness (Stevenson and Wolpers, 2009).

What happens if what children want is to be happy and everything like they hear daily? Should they be sent to school if they don't want to go? Do they have to be having fun all the time in school? What can we expect if a PP's school program asks them every day, “Children, what went well last night?” (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich and Linkins, 2009, p. 306). We know about the naïveté of *Pollyanna* and we know what happened to the self-esteem culture and programs that tell children they are special: their ego inflates and their performance goes down (Twenge and Campbell, 2010, pp. 49-50). It is not a bad idea to teach how to identify the characteristic strengths each one has in abundance, but what Schopenhauer (2000) says in Table 4 is even better.

We also know about the naïveté of Pangloss and we know what happened to the optimism of politicians, financial experts and the grass roots: the current economic crisis. This is the opinion of Ehrenreich: “The almost unanimous optimism of the experts certainly contributed to the scale up of the poor quality debt and doubtful loans, but the delusional optimism of mainstream Americans should get its share of the blame. And the ideology of positive thought gave wings to this optimism, to the feeling that ‘I am worthwhile’ that goes with it. A *Los Angeles Times* journalist,” Ehrenreich continues, “talking about *The Secret*, told me: ‘My sister, when she came home from vacation in New York, walked in my house and dropped an old hand-made leather purse on the piano stool saying, “Look what a beautiful purse I manifested myself with.’ After seeing the DVD *The Secret*, the girl

had started to believe she was worth that object, that it was hers and she had to have it, so she charged it to her credit card.” (*Smile or die*, p. 219). *L'Oréal? Because I am worth it*. Let's not get carried away by optimism! would be a good slogan for many people.

Without optimism being negative, the fact is that pessimism can also be positive. Pessimism is not a symptom but an attitude. Julie Norem has defined defensive pessimism as consisting of “preparing oneself for the worst” and mentally playing through how things could go wrong as a strategy that assists anxious people to help them manage their anxiety, so it works for and not against them (Norem, 2001). Defensive pessimism, apart from probably being more realistic and responsible, buffers the emotional impact if things go wrong and does not gratuitously exclude personal responsibility. Studies show that pessimists do not have low self-esteem, nor are they in the depths of depression, or have worse health (Norem, 2001, p. 108). However, as mentioned above, optimists boast more, probably in their own interest (Coyne et al., 2010; Rasmusen et al., 2009).

Even happiness itself can be deleterious, as discussed above. Studies show pursuit and experience of happiness can produce negative results:

- 1) When it is extreme (there is just a small step from euphoria to mania)
- 2) When it is out of place (you cannot go around cheerful anywhere),
- 3) It is pursued above everything else (in addition to distracting from what is important in life it may be disappointing), and
- 4) When one is full of self-esteem and pride and not a bit of modesty, shame or guilt, it is not surprising that one has few friends (Gruber et al, 2011).

TABLE 4 SCHOPENHAUER ON THE ARROGANCE OF STRENGTHS
<p>“When we have recognized our failures and deficiencies once and for all, the same as our good characteristics and abilities, and we have set our goals accordingly, conforming to the fact that certain things are beyond our reach, we avoid in the surest way, and to the extent that our individuality permits, the bitterest suffering, which is not being happy with ourselves as an inevitable consequence of the ignorance of individuality itself, of false presumption and the arrogance that comes from it.” (<i>The art of being happy</i>, p. 57).</p>



The well-known paradox that the pursuit of happiness scares it away has been demonstrated experimentally (Mauss, Tamir, Anderson and Savino, 2011). Better than pursuing happiness and well-being at the cost of filtering out all the negative affects and depressive symptoms, is to *let them go*, according to acceptance theory and psychological flexibility (Shallcross, Troy, Boland and Mauss, 2010).

Positive psychologists can say that they are talking about optimal levels of well-being, recognizing that too much happiness may be harmful (Oishi, Diener and Lucas, 2007), so everything related to optimism, happiness and well-being has to be specified and contextualized. It has also been suggested that psychological flexibility could be essential to well-being (Wood and TARRIER, 2010, p. 824). True. But having to specify and contextualize everything, since we are back in the old psychology again. The *Yerkes-Dodson Law* of motivation and anxiety, already known since 1908, and flexible psychology, without having to go any further, is a major concept of acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda and Lillis, 2006). It was unnecessary to invent PPs for this.

WHAT IS NEW IS NOT GOOD AND WHAT IS GOOD IS NOT NEW

Then, how is it that PPs is so successful? Doesn't it have anything positive? What future does it have? Its irrefutable success does not guarantee its goodness or scientific quality. Therein lays the success of the horoscope and of the book *The Secret*. The success of PPs is more a symptom of how the world and psychology are faring than the sign of some never-before-seen contribution. In keeping with this discussion, the success of PPs has to be situated in the context of the latest-generation hyperconsumer capitalist society of well-being. The new "individualist consumer venture of liberal societies" is characterized, says Lipovetsky, by emotional consumption, with the pursuit of happiness in the lead (*Paradoxical happiness*). Within this, PPs serves an ideological legitimization discourse (Binkley, 2011). Society is not only safe from all criticism, but is offered as a source of opportunities, and individuals are praised for their potential and encouraged with the promise of more happiness. If they are not happy it is because they do not want to be. PPs is symptomatic, then, of the consumer individualism of today's society, and with regard to psychology itself, certainly, is the symptom of intellectual poverty and desire for fashions that characterize it in its accommodating conservative drift.

Any contribution of PPS to psychology and society cannot be assumed, in spite of how it spreads. Using a well-known chiasmus, it might be said that *what is new is not good and what is good is not new*.

The good part is its emphasis on strengths, virtues and competence as an alternative to pathologization of daily life and the dominant medical model in clinical psychology. Aside from the fact that PPs has not "broken" with the medical model, but offers itself as a cosmetic complement (Joseph and Linley, 2006), the question is that the alternative it offers is already to be found in "traditional" psychology", starting with humanistic psychology (Gonzalez Pardo and Pérez Álvarez, 2007, Chapter 12). Costa and López also recall the long tradition of the potentiation model in psychology, while showing the limitations of PPs in this regard (Costa and López, 2008). The same authors would excuse Spanish psychology from falling in love with PPs (Costa and López, 2006; 2012). Probably due to its light luggage, PPs tends to fill itself up with contents already established in psychology (Prieto-Ursúa, 2006), but for this, it is unnecessary to chase after their wild geese. The problem would be that new generations of psychologists trained in its environment believe that PPs is the alpha and the omega of psychology, when in reality, it is probably one of the most frivolous trends in its history. The less psychologists read, the surer they are that it is original.

What is new is its emphasis on scientific study of happiness and well-being. But in this respect, neither are its contributions scientifically robust (pseudoscientific equations, spurious correlations, etc.), nor do happiness nor well-being seem to have sufficient solvency to found a science. The problem is that PPs distorts the purpose of psychology as the science of behavior (Costa and López, 2008). And this is because a science cannot be founded on epiphanies.

Although it would be logical for PPs to dissolve into psychology, it already has too many created interests and is institutionalized in such a way that this is not expected to occur. In spite of the scant importance that PPs gives construction of psychological phenomena and the context in which they occur, its "discourse" still has a constructive nature susceptible to creating a context and niche in which it finds its own validation (no doubt favored by tautologies) and survives thanks to its power of attraction and sympathetic magic. It is yet to be seen whether the niche is an ecosystem or a tomb.

In view of the above, the questions approached should



not stop here, but present the basic philosophical question concerning happiness as a principle of life. The reader is invited, and we hope not just one will do so, to a philosophical digression that could well be an excursion to the Picos de Europa of happiness philosophy according to the analysis and thesis of Gustavo Bueno, in his book *El mito de la felicidad. Autoayuda para desengaño de quienes buscan ser felices* (The myth of happiness. Self-help to open the eyes of people in pursuit of happiness.) (Bueno, 2005).

THE INSOLVENCY OF HAPPINESS AS A PRINCIPLE OF LIFE

Happiness, whatever it is, has become the value and mantra on which life in contemporary society seems to gravitate. Happiness is believed to be sustained by a principle like universal gravitation. Just as we say that, "all bodies tend to fall toward the center of the earth by virtue of the law of gravity," we also say that "all men wish to be happy by virtue of a supposed law of happiness." The classical formulation of this principle is found in Seneca: "All men, Brother Gallio, want to be happy" (*On happiness*, first line). A current widely-read commercial version is offered by his Holiness the Dalai Lama *urbi et orbi* when he says: "I believe that the basic reason for our lives is to seek happiness." PPs seems to take this principle as a fact or universal natural phenomenon, as if the word "happiness" in every language named a natural thread in the human being recognized in every age (eudaimonia, felicitas, happiness, felicidad, etc.).

However, according to Bueno in the book referred to above (Bueno, 2005), happiness cannot be sustained as a principle on which life gravitates, in this case, as a scientific object as appropriated by PPs. And as the purpose of self-help literature, it may be a hoax and self-deception more than help as such, and such literature may, in reality, be junk literature. A philosophical analysis is indispensable. Because happiness is not an exclusive field of psychology, unless it is by incurring in hypostasis or objectification of its usage, which is how happiness has become a topic of industrial proportions.

There are no phenomena without conceptual platforms

Bueno's analysis begins by recognizing the varied and heterogeneous field of happiness, including the phenomena usually identified as happy experiences, but also a whole set of strata that wrap up these phenomena and

make them what they are. Whatever happiness is, it is combined with other phenomena, among them unhappiness and sadness, without which happiness itself could not be confirmed. Furthermore, these phenomena form part of a set of strata. Bueno's proposal distinguishes four strata in the study of any phenomenon: concepts, ideas, theories and doctrines or conceptions of the world. The question is that phenomena are not presented to us as given, exempt realities, not even the thunder and lightning with which Bueno so skillfully illustrates this (*El Mito de la Felicidad*, pp. 52-53), but are made such by virtue of conceptual platforms (concepts, ideas, theories and doctrine). No matter how much one wishes to remain atheoretically on the plane of facts or phenomena, they are still made up by the rest of the strata and form part *in medias res* of them, however informally, confusedly or darkly, as in the case of happiness.

Happiness as used in the happiness conception world map

In his analysis of conceptions of happiness, Bueno develops a consistent system in twelve practically exhaustive models of all the given conceptions. The system is the result of crossing three types of happiness theories by how the relationship between happiness and unhappiness is understood with four groups of spiritualist and materialist doctrines. It is important to stress here that the place on the happiness conception world map of the current conception of happiness in use by PPs and self-help literature results from this classification. It is also important to calibrate the consistency of the happiness principle, according to which, everybody wants to be happy.

In the first place, the current conception *breaks* with the great traditional conceptions (Aristotle, stoicism, Saint Thomas, Spinoza), although they may be referred to as historical background. In general, these are really just ornamental pedantic references more than anything else. In the second place, hypostasis or objectification of happiness is also observed as an overdimensioned phenomenon in the field of happiness. Without the conceptual platform of traditional models, the happiness in use has only coarse, subjectivist, utilitarian, or as Bueno says, *contemptible* meaning. It should be advanced that Bueno is not defending previous conceptions, but demolishing the happiness principle.

The break with and detachment from traditional philosophical conceptions and the resulting hypostatization and crystallization of the "contemptible



conception" are situated by Bueno in the illustration with Kant's (1724-1804) formulation. Kant would have separated subjective sensory happiness from the noble goal of understanding and will (*El Mito de la Felicidad*, pp. 279-283). With Kant and starting off from him, happiness detached from virtue predominates. It should be added, that according to Martha Nussbaum, in this case, the break also has to do with Jeremy Bentham's (1748-1832) utilitarianism as a historical setting, with its reduction of happiness to pleasure and satisfaction, which is the basis of the conception used by PPs (Nussbaum, 2008). Nietzsche's famous aphorism by which, "Mankind does not strive for happiness; only the Englishman does that," (*Twilight of the Idols*), is probably inspired by the *British* utilitarian doctrine. Speaking of Bentham and his arithmetic of pleasure ("the greater happiness for the largest number"), Bueno emphasizes the link between happiness and statistics as a science of the modern state. "Statistical happiness", predecessor of the current science of well-being, would give "contemptible happiness" political dimensions arising from the Enlightenment (*El Mito de la Felicidad*, p. 341).

According to traditional conceptions, happiness was sustained by philosophical platforms (metaphysical-theological) and in connection with destiny and man's place on earth. By the same token, happiness was linked to virtues and human activities. However, starting from the separation introduced by Kant and the utilitarianism doctrine, whatever happiness is, it enters the movement of subjective well-being overdimensioned with regard to the rest of psychological phenomena, decontextualized from the circumstances of life, reduced to a few items, and evaluated by its usefulness for this and that (often health, money and love). PPs and self-help literature are the apotheosis of this *degeneration* of the traditional conceptions of happiness. It is this subjectivist and utilitarian conception that Bueno identifies as "contemptible happiness" (*El Mito de la Felicidad*, pp. 276-279). He calls it "a cur"¹ because of its *canine* ("*canalla*" from Latin *canis*, dog and Italian *canaglia*) reference to everyone for himself getting the most satisfaction out of the moment and opportunity, as happiness in modern times is disconnected from any virtue inserted in a wider sense (cosmological, theological-political), as it was in traditional conceptions.

¹ Spanish=*canalla*

The ideological platform of current happiness

What is the conceptual platform for the current conception of happiness? Lacking in any of the traditional religious-philosophical platforms, the happiness platform in use is just "positive" individualism, which includes the metaphysics of American religion and the utilitarian doctrine as its historic roots, and the neoliberal ideology typical of the society of well-being and consumer capitalism as its current ideological coverage (Cabanas and Sánchez, 2012). PPs literature and self-help literature (assuming they can be differentiated) provide the texture and the discourse that make up the individual, social and cultural happiness phenomenon, with its political dimensions (ideology) and industrial proportions (happiness industry). The "science" of happiness and well-being, far from describing given facts and realities, makes them up, spreads them and collects them. And thus the hyperreflective "mash" that people have about how to be happy, knowing how happy you are, the road to happiness, the keys to happiness, the journey to optimism, etc., by which people are determined to be happy, instead of normal.

Succumbing to happiness is not inevitable

Even assuming the brevity of life and discarding traditional conceptions as spiritual and metaphysical, "contemptible happiness" is not inevitable. As Bueno says, "It would be as logical to adhere, in this short life, not just to the perspective of happiness, but to anything else, be it interest in building a tower, a state or a sonnet, or interest in growing a garden or a calf, and whether this makes me happy or demands interminable effort. / Only the cur still retains this hyena's instinct for seeking to take advantage of the waste, and also seeking to "be compensated" or "avenged" for the supposed loss of some goods that he considered his own, but which have got away from him," (*El Mito de la Felicidad*, p. 278).

The happiness in use by the science of happiness and well-being, apart from simplification and the *bullying* it leads to, may be a fraud. Simplification is the reduction of happiness or well-being to a response (for example, "very satisfied", "satisfied", "slightly satisfied" and "not satisfied at all") to questions such as, "Everything considered, how satisfied are you with your present life?" According to Nussbaum, questions of this type bully people by *forcing* them to merge very different types of expe-



riences into a single unit in the name of a supposedly scientific scale (Nussbaum, 2008, p. 86).

Concerning fraud, it could be that happiness does not even make sense until after death, depending on how ephemeral or even whimsical the pleasures, satisfactions and well-being are. The terms for happiness in Spanish and Latin (*felicitas*, *beatitudo*, *laetitia*) are linked to phenomena, in fact, goals, that have to do with livestock and agricultural plenty in contrast to times of poverty, as Bueno recalls, while reminding of the etymological relationship of *felicidad* (happiness) with *bebé feliz* (happy baby) and *felatio* (*El Mito de la Felicidad*, pp. 60-64, 76-80). The English term *happiness*, as Bueno also recalls, suggests casual passing joys, in its relationship with happen (occur, take place), hap (chance, opportunity, possibility), and haphazard (lucky, chance) (*El Mito de la Felicidad*, pp. 84-86). As happiness is passing and random, a happy life cannot be certified except after death, because you never know how it is going to end. Remember the famous story about Solon and Croesus, recalled and analyzed in *El Mito de la felicidad* (Table 5).

Demolishing the principle of happiness

Bueno's position is intended to tear the principle of happiness ("all men want to be happy") to shreds. Far from its inoffensive appearance and presentation as idea-universal attraction, the principle of happiness is in fact an ideological principle, "under the umbrella of which," says Bueno, very different interests are acting, not always compatible with each other, and often repugnant or contemptible" (*The Myth of Happiness*, p. 309). To begin with, nobody knows what happiness is. As Aristotle says, "Some consider it a visible and manifest thing, like pleasure, wealth or honor; others, something else, and often the same person takes it for different things, health, when he is ill, and wealth when he is poor." (*Nicomachean Ethics*, I, iv). "Everyone wants to be happy," said Seneca, and adds, "But when they go to find out what makes one happy, they are groping in the dark," (*On Happiness*).

The ease with which PPs and self-help literature talk about happiness cannot be more than a maneuver of Sartrean "bad faith". So as not to face its own emptiness, this literature deceives and self-deceives, presenting what it is not as if it were, and what it is as if it were not. It is in this Sartrean sense that Bueno calls the principle of happiness and the idea of happiness itself products of bad faith (*El Mito de la Felicidad*, p. 311). This is understood after a logical and nosological examination

showing and demonstrating the emptiness of the principle of happiness. While the *subject* "all men" is indeterminate, because it is abstract and generic, as if to be the subject of human predicates, the *predicate* "happiness" is empty, incomplete, unclassifiable, and needs to be resolved by very different contents or values, often opposite of each other. The happiness principle has to be resolved by determinate statements. But when it does, there are human situations in which happiness is not sought, like survival or fulfilling duty, although they have unhappy connotations (*The Myth of Happiness*, p. 336). In any case, whatever happiness is, it may be anything, and difficult to combine in the same idea. The *tragic* happiness of someone who is getting revenge is surely not the same type of corny happiness of someone watching a sunset.

As the content of the happiness predicate or desire for happiness are so diverse and divergent, the only thing they could possibly have in common is the *feeling* of satisfaction, pleasing, cheer, joy, pleasure that would supposedly have to accompany any concrete value determining happiness. The problem is that the feeling of happiness is more an oblique accompaniment than a real component of the values and contents of happiness. Paraphrasing Nietzsche, "not everyone pursues happi-

TABLE 5
WISE SOLON AND RICH CROESUS

Solon, one of the seven wise men of Greece, visited Croesus, King of Lydia, who was considered the most fortunate and happy of men. Croesus asked Solon about the happiest men he had known. Solon named, among others, the Athenian, Tellus, "because his homeland was flourishing when he saw how his sons prospered as fine men and saw how his grandchildren grew; and he met the most glorious death defending his homeland in the Battle of Eleusis", but he did not name Croesus himself, who became impatient. Then, when Solon answered him that no man alive can consider himself happy. "The life of the man, oh Croesus," Solon told him, "is a series of highs and lows. Today you are a rich and powerful monarch obeyed by many people, but I cannot dare even to give you that name you ambition after (happy man) until I know how the course of your life ends." The case is that in later days and years, misfortunes began to fall on Croesus (his son was struck down by chance by a friend's arrow, Croesus himself was taken prisoner by Cyrus and along with others was burned alive in a pyre). Then Croesus exclaimed: "Oh, Solon, Solon." Cyrus changed his opinion when he realized that he himself was a man and was going to burn another man alive who in times gone by had been no less happy than he was now and Croesus was released, etc.

One consequence of this story taken by Bueno concerning Aristotle's happiness, "If someone who believes himself to be happy is aware," says Bueno, "if he is not stupid, should know that the sense of his happiness is only an appearance that cannot ever satisfy him. This happiness will always be limited by the insecurity derived from the fragility of life. And this limitation will already be sufficient for anyone who feels happy to stop considering himself happy, that is, stop covering up the reality of his condition in the world with his empty feelings of self-complacency." (*El Mito de la Felicidad*, pp. 210-212).



ness, only those who read self-help books." And even they, pursuing happiness are made unhappy, probably because they are distracted from the important things in life and do not do anything but ruminate on junk literature. Everyone else is devoted to the activities of daily life, which is plenty. "The reduction of a value of happiness to its "enjoyment" or "pleasure", says Bueno, "is simply gross psychologism, because the value of happiness generally consists in *something specific* that is usually located in a space "beyond" its enjoyment or pleasure." "The psychologist's interpretation of happiness is, according to this, much less than a theory: it may be simply a symptom of laziness or intellectual poverty," (*El Mito de la Felicidad*, pp. 259 and 260).

The unification of the values of happiness from the feeling assumes a hypostatic or nominalizing operation, by which the oblique subjective components go on to represent the direct or substantive content of happiness. This hypostatic mechanism by which a *generic* part assumes the *specific* content would be similar to raising the binding of a book to the equalized representation of its content, without which, however, the book as such would not exist. This sentimentalist emptiness has not impeded, and may even have enabled, the attractiveness and friendliness that happiness awakens in today's society, in the hands of politicians, motivational speakers, happiologists and happiness industry entrepreneurs. And with PPs as the sector science. "As a result," says Bueno, "The principle of happiness is perfectly understood, and even more so, explicitly stated as the true practical goal of mankind, which the preachers, politicians and souls drivers are trying to spread as a program in which all men can find accord and peace, the universal Principle of happiness, are only getting closer to fraud, or simply stupidity," (*El Mito de la Felicidad*, p. 362). In fact, the principle of happiness is not empirical, but regulatory, imposing, a tyranny. Who asked all men and women if they are seeking happiness? Not even the great conceptions of happiness expect this to be within reach of the common mortal, according to which happiness was linked to virtue (and not entertainment) and contemplation by wise men like Aristotle, not just anyone. Where was the supreme good of happiness for slaves? And we already know what happened to Croesus. The same could be said of the stoic conceptions and of Spinoza. Perhaps the principle of happiness fits in Saint Thomas's conception to the extent that anyone can be happy in the love of God through the Church. But though St. Thomas's is a true the-

ory in its formal architecture, it is not in its theological and mythological nature.

Apart from this, some people are uncomfortable when they feel happy and see that their life is "leveraged" without doing anything of interest (Nussbaum, 2008, p. 87). "Nothing is more unbearable than several days in a row of happiness," sentenced Goethe, and Bernard Shaw repeated; "There is nothing more fastidious than a series of happy days, I wouldn't wish them on my worst enemy," (quoted in *El Mito de la Felicidad*, p. 240). Depending on whether there is unhappiness in happiness, it is also possible to conceive of the happiness of unhappiness, with regard to enjoyment of melancholy (Schmid, 2010). Michaelangelo said in the 16th century, "My joy is melancholy," and Victor Hugo in the 19th, "Melancholy is the pleasure of being sad." The duty of the spleen, not of happiness, guided Baudelaire and so many others. As happiness is boring and its search an added problem, Eric Wilson eulogized melancholy, of interest to the present times dominated by happiness, in his book *Against Happiness; In Praise of Melancholy* (Wilson, 2008). According to Fernando Colina, "A world without melancholy, that is, without nostalgia, without boredom, without waiting, without laziness and without the constituent inclination of thinking things through to the end, is a space abandoned for the exponential emergency of so-called depressions," (*Melancolía y paranoia*, p. 49; Colina, 2011)

The principle of happiness is like a norm which people seem to have to abide by. The high percentage of people who say they are happy in the surveys does not match with the data on incidence of depression, anxiety, illnesses of all kinds, crises, unemployment, adverse circumstances, and the number of people who read self-help books and are therefore supposedly not happy, etc. Why do they say they are happy? Aside from why they have been asked and that this is a topic going around, surely, because if they did not, others and they themselves would think they are failures, as happiness has become a norm in an age governed by "despotic happiness", according to Gilles Lipovetsky in *Paradoxical Happiness* (Lipovetsky, 2007, p. 323). As Miguel Costa and Ernesto López say, "With the solemn proclamation of positive emotions, and in particular, happiness, as the new Ithaca to which we must all take our ships, we may be provoking paradoxically, an epidemic of frustration and negative emotions in all those who live as if it were a calamity that they had not yet found it" (Costa and López, 2008,



p. 97). Odysseus (Ulysses) himself chose to return to Ithaca undertaking the hardships of life, even though the beautiful Calypso assured him a paradisiac life, eternally young (*The Odyssey*, VII, 260).

"What does happiness matter to me!, Zarathustra answered. I haven't wished for happiness for ages, I am striving after my work:" (Thus spoke Zarathustra, 321).

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